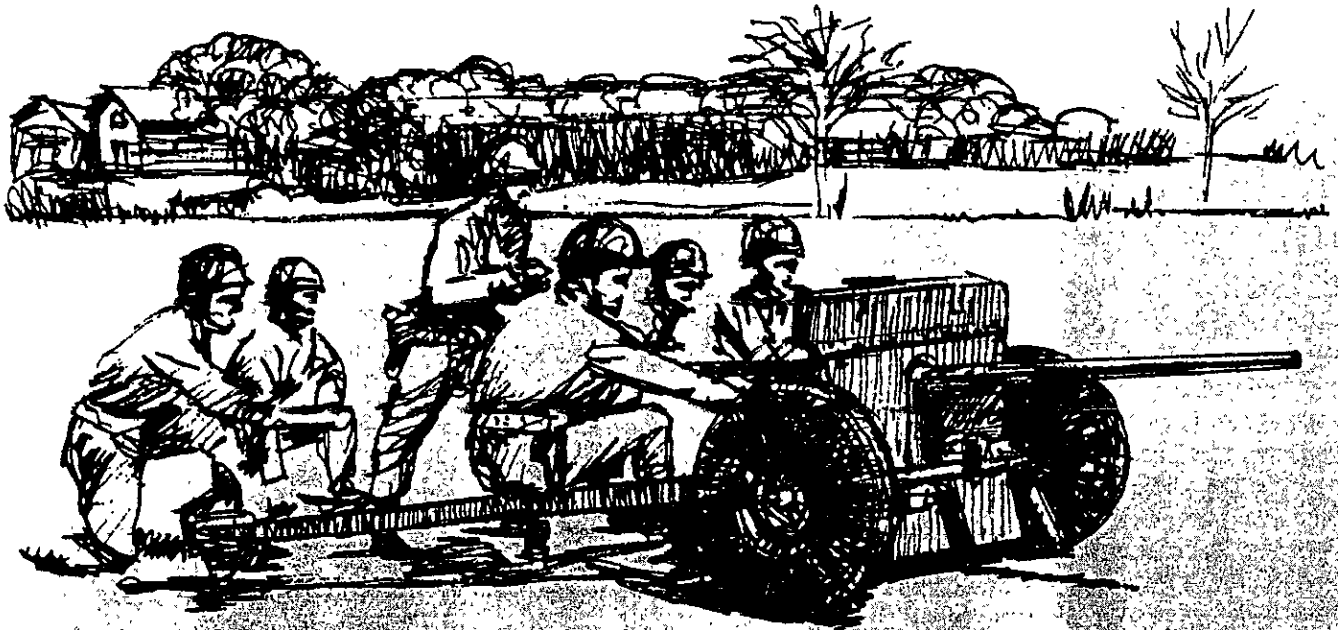


KMAG AND THE 7TH ROK DIVISION



LIEUTENANT THOMAS A. HALL

AUTHOR'S NOTE: On 25 June 1950, eight divisions of the North Korean People's Army, the Inmun Gun, poured across the length of the 38th parallel into the Republic of Korea (ROK). The all-out invasion caught the ROK Army and its United States advisors, the Military Advisory Group to the Republic of Korea (commonly referred to as KMAG), completely off guard. Seoul fell within three days as North Korean forces overwhelmed the defending ROK Army.

Little has been written about the initial days of the Korean War. ROK Army accounts are of dubious accuracy, and KMAG did a better-than-average job of destroying its few records when it withdrew to Japan.

One of the few scholarly attempts to record the history of KMAG is Major Robert K. Sawyer's *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*. Sawyer's account was recorded mainly from interviews with KMAG officers, most of whom were in Seoul when the war began. Thus, the 7th ROK Division's defense of the Uijongbu Corridor was scarcely mentioned, even though the Inmun Gun's main effort against Seoul was directed through this corridor.

The small body of material on the ROK Army that is currently available to students of military history is generally rather poor. The impression most contemporary Korean War historians convey is that, while a few fanatical ROK soldiers with grenades rushed North Korean tanks in suicidal "banzai" charges (conforming to the typically pseudo-Japanese stereotype of Asian soldiers in U.S. history), the ROK Army as a whole disintegrated at the first sight of North Korean tanks and its soldiers fought like raw recruits.

Fortunately, though, not all KMAG records were destroyed. As KMAG advisors to the 7th ROK Division at Uijongbu watched North Korean forces advance closer to the city, they initiated a planned withdrawal. A KMAG clerk, my father, who was ordered to destroy all of the detachment's records at Uijongbu dutifully did so, except for one document—the daily journal of the KMAG detachment at Uijongbu for 1950. The journal describes in great detail the events of 25 and 26 June. This previously unpublished journal forms the basis of this article and sheds considerable light on those dark and confused days of 1950.

The 7th Infantry Division of the ROK Army had been activated on 22 January 1949 and had gone through numer-

ous changes before the war broke out. Although the 7th Division was activated with the 1st, 9th, and 19th Regiments,

ROK Army Headquarters in Seoul had a practice of moving units around to balance out discrepancies in readiness between the divisions of the expanding ROK Army.

On 25 January 1950, therefore, the 19th Regiment was transferred from the 7th to the 5th Division in exchange for the 3d Regiment. Then, on 15 June (only ten days before the invasion), the 3d Regiment was transferred to the Capital Division and moved to Seoul. Its replacement, the 25th Regiment, was newly activated and consisted entirely of untrained recruits. When war came, the 25th had not yet made the move to Uijongbu, although the 3d had already relocated to Seoul.

Underequipped by U.S. standards, the 7th Division had the best equipment then available to ROK forces. The soldiers' rifles and ammunition were of World War II vintage, but at least U.S.-made equipment had replaced all of their captured Japanese weapons. They had 57mm antitank guns and 2.36-inch rocket launchers, although both had been obsolete since 1944 and their ammunition was old. Too, there were few antitank rounds for the 57s, while the weapon's high explosive (HE) rounds could disable a tank only if a gunner made an incredibly skilled or extremely lucky shot.

The KMAC advisory staff was undermanned, as was the entire advisory group throughout the Korean peninsula. Each ROK infantry division was supposed to have a KMAC contingent of 13 officers and 14 enlisted men. In June 1950, the KMAC staff with the 7th Division at Uijongbu had only nine officers and six enlisted men (five of them NCOs), or just over one-half of its authorized strength. The only other Americans in the area were Central Intelligence Agency personnel who had set up field offices in Tongduchon and Pochon on 25 March.

Despite operating shorthanded, the advisors put extraordinary efforts into trying to transform the division's raw recruits into disciplined, fighting soldiers. Occasionally, their training was rather innovative—in April, for example, 20 North Korean-trained guerrillas who had defected to the south were employed to teach guerrilla tactics to the 7th Division troops.

In May, the staff of the 7th Division coordinated defense plans with the 1st Division on its left and the 6th Division on its right. The division went through inspections and field evaluations about every two weeks during early 1950, the last being a tour of the division area by U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on 18 June, just seven days before hostilities began.

The first warning that the *Inmun Gun* was massing for an attack came two days before the actual invasion. On Friday, 23 June, First Lieutenant Gordon D. Mohr, advisor to the 2d Battalion of the 9th Regiment, reported North Korean trucks rolling down to positions along the border and then returning north empty.

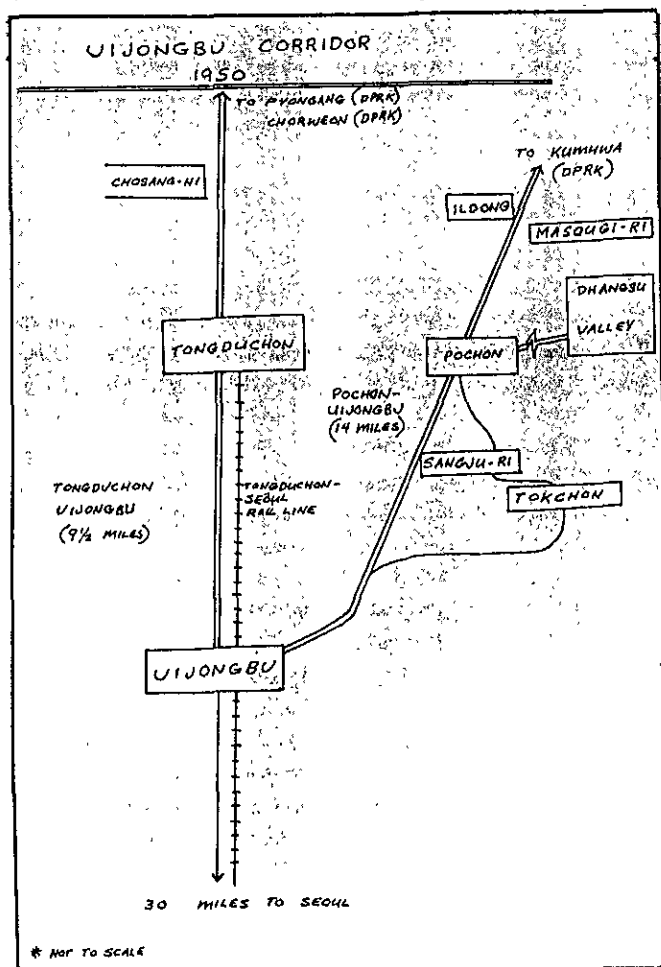
Inexplicably, Lieutenant Mohr's report failed to alert anyone in either Uijongbu or Seoul that a major attack was in the making. It was a Friday afternoon, and in the hot Korean summer of 1950, the ROK soldiers and U.S. advisors of the 7th Division thought only of relaxing over the weekend in

Seoul. At the end of the day, weekend passes were handed out as usual, and most of the KMAC members left to join their families in the capital.

What Lieutenant Mohr could not see was that the *Inmun Gun* has massed two full infantry divisions, two regiments of an armored brigade, mounted horse cavalry, and border constabulary units just across the border in the city of Chorwon. The North Korean 3d and 4th Divisions, supported by the 107th and 109th Regiments of the 105th Independent Armored Brigade, were scheduled to lead the main thrust of the invasion along the Pyonggang-Uijongbu and Kumwha-Uijongbu roads (see accompanying map).

Both the 3d and the 4th Divisions were among the best and oldest in the North Korean People's Army; most of their soldiers had served in the ethnic Korean units of the Chinese People's Army and had been released in 1948 to form the core of the *Inmun Gun*. The 105th Independent Armored Brigade fielded the excellent T-34 tank—the reliable workhorse of the Soviet Army that had seen service from its introduction in the mid-1930s and would continue to serve until well into the 1960s.

The North Korean plan of attack called for the 4th Division and 107th Armored Regiment to push through Tongduchon to Uijongbu—the most direct route to Seoul. (This same force would be the first to encounter U.S. troops in Task Force Smith at Suwon a few days later.) The North Korean 3d Division and 109th Armored Regiment were to attack



through Pochon to the east; both forces were expected to brush aside the numerically inferior ROK forces and link up to assault Uijongbu. They were expected to be the vanguard of the North Korean effort to capture Seoul.

At 0545 on 25 June, the cool Korean morning was shattered by North Korean artillery and mortar fire falling on Company G of the 1st ROK Regiment at Chosang-ni. The company reported a barrage of 120mm mortar and 124mm artillery fire hitting its positions and the village. At 0600, a battalion of infantry moved south against Company G.

Just as the *Inmun Gun* units started their move across the border, the 7th ROK Division Headquarters went on alert. The enemy fire had alerted those KMAG advisors still at Uijongbu. Corporal Dean D. Hall, the KMAG clerk, was one of the six enlisted soldiers and two officers present that morning. When the first shots were heard, he jumped into his jeep and drove to the 7th Division's headquarters. As other KMAG staff members arrived, they notified KMAG headquarters in Seoul of the attack and began to recall advisors from their homes. It was 0630 before the senior advisor, Major Joseph W. Bilello, was located and notified of the alert. He did not arrive at Uijongbu until 0845.

As other KMAG advisors worked to coordinate operations, Captain Bobbie B. Ford, a 1st Regiment advisor, and Sergeant John H. Yerby, a radio operator, left for Tongduchon in a radio truck. At 0700 a radio message from Seoul confirmed that attacks were occurring along the length of the border. Fifteen minutes later, a battalion of the 1st Regiment had been collected and had begun moving by truck to Tongduchon. A battery of the 7th ROK Field Artillery Battalion followed it north.

ARTILLERY SUPPORT

By this time, Company G, 1st ROK Regiment, had been defending Chosang-ni against a battalion of North Koreans for more than two hours. Unfortunately, its artillery support, a battery from the 7th ROK Field Artillery Battalion, was garrisoned at Uijongbu and did not have its 105mm howitzers set up in forward fire bases. Running low on ammunition, Company G was forced to withdraw south toward Tongduchon, and at 0800 North Korean troops occupied Company G's positions. Runners from Chosang-ni reported numerous tanks leading the North Korean thrust into the village. The supporting battery of ROK artillery arrived 45 minutes later, too late to support the defense of Chosang-ni. The 40 surviving soldiers of Company G reported in at Uijongbu the next day.

The North Koreans then fixed their artillery on Tongduchon and by 0930 had dropped between 400 and 500 rounds on the city. The collapse of Chosang-ni had allowed the enemy to occupy some of the positions of the 2d Battalion, 1st ROK Regiment, and push two miles into the regiment's sector. Five tanks pressed the attack through Chosang-ni; one T-34 was knocked out by the 57mm antitank guns of the 2d Battalion's antitank platoon. Captain Ford reported that

the enemy thrust was centered along the Tongduchon-Uijongbu rail line.

The second thrust of the *Inmun Gun* began on the 9th ROK Regiment's positions to the east of Tongduchon. The soldiers of Company G defended their positions at Ildong against an overwhelming force from the North Korean 3d Division and its supporting armor from 0530 until 1000, when its dwindling ammunition and mounting casualties made its positions untenable. Denied reinforcements, as none were available, the survivors of Company G began to carry their wounded toward Pochon. The 9th ROK Regiment commander ordered his antitank platoon to withdraw when the T-34s stopped 700 meters out of range and began to shell its positions.

Meanwhile, one of the most unusual engagements of the day took place at the positions of Company E, 9th Regiment. Located in the isolated Dhangsu Valley on the eastern edge of the 7th ROK Division's sector, Company E suddenly found itself surrounded by North Korean horse cavalry. Cut off from reinforcements, Company E was soon overrun, and only a handful of survivors made it back to the rear.

ENEMY ADVANCES

As the enemy advance pressed into the 1st and 9th regimental sectors, the recently transferred 3d ROK Regiment was ordered to move north from Seoul to join the 7th Division. At 1030 another battery of artillery moved out of Uijongbu, this time to support 9th Regiment positions at Masougi-ri and Pochon. Although Tongduchon continued to draw enemy artillery fire, two battalions of the 1st Regiment held the line against the *Inmun Gun* attackers.

By 1100, however, North Korean armor threatened the line at Tongduchon. ROK bazooka teams, armed with 2.36-inch rocket launchers, were dispatched from Uijongbu to block the approaches to Tongduchon and Pochon. An additional battery of artillery, under the direction of Lieutenant John W. Airsman, the KMAG Field Artillery advisor, left Uijongbu to reinforce the 9th. (The commander of the 7th Field Artillery Battalion arrived just as his last battery was leaving the gates enroute to Pochon; a ROK first lieutenant had commanded the battalion until now.) The North Koreans continued in their attempts to breach the 9th Regiment's lines, pressing the 3d Battalion at Masougi-ri and capturing a vital bridge into the city. Enemy artillery located the regimental company post, and began to shell it regularly.

At noon, the 3d Regiment and the School Battalion of Field Artillery left Seoul to assist the 7th Division, a one-and-one-half-hour trip. Meanwhile, North Korean troops had crossed the Imjin River on the left flank of ROK 1st Regiment, and the ROK defenders were falling critically short of ammunition, particularly artillery rounds. Twelve minutes after American ambassador John Muccio announced at 1300 that North Korea had declared war on the south, three artillery batteries in the 1st ROK Regiment's sector fired their last rounds and withdrew from the battle.

As the troops ran low on ammunition, they were faced with



Main Street, Uijongbu, January 1950

an enemy now swarming on their flanks. Lacking friendly artillery support, the ROK troops began to fold. Two platoons of engineers, carrying 100 pounds of TNT, departed Uijongbu to join the units in contact. An antitank company arrived from the School Battalion and was immediately sent to Pochon with instructions to "chase tanks." Three companies of the 1st ROK Regiment (Companies I, L, and M) were still at Uijongbu trying to round up soldiers who were straggling in from Seoul.

By 1445 two enemy tanks had made an end run to the south of Pochon, while ten had pushed into Tongduchon itself. All of the 3d ROK Regiment arrived at Uijongbu shortly thereafter. KMAG regimental advisor, Major Perley A. Washburn, directed its 2d Battalion to support the 1st Regiment, while the 1st and 3d Battalions moved to assist the 9th. The North Koreans, held up for more than nine hours by the stubborn defenders of Tongduchon and Uijongbu, called forward the bulk of their armor to punch through the steadily weakening 7th ROK Division's lines.

In spite of the arrival of ROK reinforcements on the battlefield, by 1745 the 7th Division's defenses were near collapse. Forty enemy T-34s had entered Pochon, with two reaching the police station in the center of the town. Enemy infantry captured the meager ammunition dump. Lieutenant Mohr had taken command of two 57mm antitank guns and

had attempted to stop enemy tanks at the bridge north of Pochon, although the antitank section had run out of antitank rounds and had to fire HE at two tanks. The tanks returned fire and destroyed the guns and their jeeps. Lieutenant Mohr withdrew with his surviving ROK soldiers on foot; he reported in at Seoul the next day, having walked the distance with his small group.

As the North Korean 3d Division pushed into Pochon, the scene turned chaotic. Two battalions of the 9th ROK Regiment were surrounded and cut off. The 7th ROK Division commander ordered all available artillery to flatten Pochon in an attempt to drive out the North Korean tanks. All communications with the forces in Pochon were lost; four hours earlier, enemy artillery pieces had found their range to the regimental command post and had hit it with 14 well-placed rounds. Only 11 men had survived the barrage.

In the melee, ROK antitank guns knocked out four more T-34s. Captain Edward L. Sievers, a 9th ROK Regiment advisor, was ordered to observe the destruction of Pochon by ROK artillery, but the artillery batteries had already expended nearly all their ammunition and the razing of Pochon never occurred. However, he did see the North Korean horse cavalry from the Dhangsu Valley ride into Pochon. By 1900 Pochon had fallen.

ROK forces fell back to form a reserve line of defense. The

commander of the 1st Battalion, 9th ROK Regiment organized 100 National Policemen for defense and was told that 50 more were on the way. Lieutenant Airsman reported that the 9th had formed a defensive line at Sangju-ri. The 3d Regiment was a position but wanted to withdraw three miles farther south.

Not wanting to lose the momentum of their assault, the North Koreans pressed on toward their link-up point as the sun set on the first day of the war.

At 2030 four tanks broke through the defenses at Sangju-ri and headed for Uijongbu. ROK antitank squads began to pull back, and communications were lost with both the 1st and the 9th Regiments. By 2055 some North Korean tanks were within six miles of Uijongbu. The 7th ROK Division had established that city as its last line of defense, beyond which the unit would be too spent to operate as an effective fighting force. Three antitank guns, a .50 caliber machinegun, and numerous 2.36-inch rocket launchers were set up north of the city at a bridge on the road to Pochon. The bridge was also rigged for demolition in case the weaponry failed to stop the tanks. The ROK antitank company at the bridge could not get any antitank ammunition and had to make do with HE rounds.

North Korean tanks closed to within four miles of Uijongbu. One T-34 was put out of action when it hit a ROK two-and-one-half-ton truck that had been left in the road as an obstacle. The tank slipped off the narrow road and flipped over into a rice paddy. At about the same time, members of a ROK horse cavalry platoon that had been used mainly for parades in Seoul rode into the division area and offered their services. By 2105 Tongduchon had fallen and was burning; enemy infantry moved south of the city to engage the 1st ROK Regiment's command post.

ASSESS PROGRESS

Major Bilello, assessing the progress of the North Koreans, ordered all KMAC advisors to the Uijongbu compound, although not all would or could obey his order. Lieutenant Airsman chose to stay at the bridge north of the city with the ROK antitank company. Both the advisors and the ROKs expected the *Immun Gun* to push their attack through the night, driving through to capture Uijongbu by morning.

That goal certainly seemed within the reach of the *Immun Gun*—the 7th had been fighting a punishing delaying action all day and was exhausted. Thus, it was curious that at 2100 that evening, the North Koreans halted their advance approximately five miles north of Uijongbu. This gave the ROK units a chance to rest and rearm, and allowed the 7th its first opportunity to take the fight to the enemy.

The lull also allowed ROK units to shift and reinforce their defensive positions; the ROK 2d Division arrived and moved in to relieve the battered 9th Regiment. The 7th moved its remaining forces, including the 3d ROK Regiment, into the 1st Regiment sector. Tank hunting teams moved out into Sangju-ri and Pochon in desperate attempts to hurt the armored strength of the attackers. The teams located 25 tanks

in Pochon and five in Sangju-ri; they destroyed two. By this time, the 7th Division had knocked out 12 tanks (the 9th Regiment had accounted for seven of these, while the 1st scored the other five).

Although casualty counts and unit strength reports came in, they were wildly inaccurate, and thousands of troops were unaccounted for. Some, such as Company E in the Dhangsu Valley, were almost certainly wiped out. Others simply lacked radio contact with their commanders and could not report.

At 0100, KMAC headquarters in Seoul notified the advisors that Operation Fireside, the evacuation of American dependents, was in effect. All civilians were to depart from Inchon to Japan between 0300 and 0530 that morning.

The U.S. personnel in and around Uijongbu knew, however, that their fight was far from over. Tank hunting teams moved north to Tokchon and then swung west to Sangju-ri to lay mines north and south of the village along the main road. Efforts to consolidate and reorganize were hampered by refugees fleeing to the south.

The remainder of the night was spent improving positions and planning the defense of the city. Units continued to arrive from Seoul. The 5th Regiment of the 2d Division, plus the 18th, 16th, and 24th Regiments as well as a company of horse cavalry, moved into the Uijongbu Corridor to aid the 7th. The 3d Regiment consolidated its positions and began implementing a plan to destroy strategic bridges and isolate tanks north of the city. The 9th Regiment had effectively delayed the advance, but at a terrible cost; the next day, only 23 officers and 345 soldiers could be accounted for.

IMPROVED MOOD

The mood began to improve among the staff and officers of the 7th. While Tongduchon had fallen, it had been reported that the North Koreans had lost six tanks, 400 soldiers, and 60 horses during the pitched house-to-house battle for the city. It seemed that, although outmanned and outgunned, the 7th Division was giving a good account of itself.

Noting the recently arrived fresh units, the ROKs ordered a counterattack on Tongduchon for 0900, 26 June, but it began poorly and ended in disaster. The plan of attack called for the 7th and 2d Divisions to attack abreast of each other, their sectors divided by the Tongduchon-Uijongbu road. The 1st and 18th Regiments, eager to begin, evidently had crossed their line of departure early and had closed to within two miles of Tongduchon by 0905. Here they ran into heavy opposition and their casualties began to mount.

Meanwhile, the 2d Division had not yet crossed the line of departure. It reported meeting opposition, but later inquiries discovered that because the division commander had disagreed with the plan of attack, he had procrastinated in executing it. Four hours into the counterattack, the 2d Division was only seven kilometers north of Uijongbu.

The 7th Division pressed on, unaware that its flank was now exposed. The 3d Regiment had units north and south of

Sangju-ri and had retaken the vital road into the village. The 1st Regiment was on the outskirts of Tongduchon, but its counterattacks on the city cost 12 killed, 80 wounded, and 200 missing or unaccounted for. Meanwhile, North Korean forces rushed through the vacant 2d Division sector toward Uijongbu.

At 1115, mortar fire began to fall on Uijongbu. It was then that the full impact of the flawed counterattack became known. The North Koreans had been able to press toward the city while the 7th Division expended the last of its resources attacking Tongduchon. When the 1st and 18th Regiments were finally ordered to withdraw at 1330, enemy forces were already well to their rear. Three enemy artillery pieces (150mm or 170mm) began to fire on Uijongbu at 1240. Troops in Uijongbu began to panic; the 2d Division began to pull back, as did a battery of ROK artillery.

Other ROK artillery batteries continued to fire. They hit and disabled two tanks, and the 2d Division infantry units destroyed another three T-34s. The 1st and 18th Regiments attempted to fight their way south, but it was too late. They were too low on ammunition and troops, and their own lines at Uijongbu had disintegrated too rapidly. While the North Korean 4th Division shelled Chongdong and Uijongbu, their 3d Division swarmed toward the fleeing ROK 7th Division.

At 1500 mortar and artillery fire began to hit the division command post. Recognizing the situation as hopeless, KMAC ordered all advisors to move to Kimpo Airfield for evacuation. Corporal Hall and the rest of the KMAC staff drove through the chaotic, refugee-filled streets of Seoul to report in at KMAC headquarters and then turned toward Kimpo. As planes arrived to pick up the advisors, the soldiers emptied rounds from their pistols into the engines of the jeeps to disable them.

At approximately the same time their planes touched down

in Sasebo, Japan, North Korean infantry and armor overran the last of the Uijongbu defenders and captured the city. While the remnants of the 7th contested the *Inmun Gun* during the following weeks, the division had been effectively eliminated as a fighting force. When the ROK Army was reorganized in July 1950, there were so few survivors from the 7th Division that it was not reactivated.

Given the conditions of June 1950, it is unlikely that the fledgling ROK Army could have turned the tide of the invasion, but certain steps could have been taken that would have slowed the advance of the *Inmun Gun*. If closer attention had been paid to Lieutenant Mohr's report on 23 June, passes for that fateful weekend might have been cancelled. Because they were not, ROK forces were thrown piecemeal into the battle, and reinforcements were not available to units that were critically engaged and surrounded. Similarly, the defenders erred in not having their artillery and antiarmor units deployed to support the forward units; these units too often arrived after the battle had already been decided.

In spite of these mistakes, the defense the 7th ROK Division put up in the Uijongbu Corridor displayed the tenacity and professionalism of the ROK Army and KMAC in responding to the North Korean invasion. Standing and fighting while low on ammunition, lacking adequate support, and facing a bigger and better-equipped opponent, the 7th Division bought time—with their lives—for the Republic of Korea.

Lieutenant Thomas A. Hall served with the 2d Infantry Division in Korea as an assistant S-3, a mortar platoon leader, and a rifle platoon leader. He is now assigned to the 1st Battalion, 325th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), in which he has been a company executive officer and an antitank platoon leader.

